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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 000296

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/YERGER
DEPT PASS TO EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [PARM](#) [PINR](#) [SY](#) [IS](#) [LE](#)
SUBJECT: LEBANON: ARAB LEAGUE SYG MOUSSA REPORTS GLASS IS
HALF FULL

REF: A. BEIRUT 292
[1](#)B. BEIRUT 286

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Classified By: Charge d'Affaires a.i. Michele J. Sison for Reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) Arab League Secretary General Amr Moussa, just minutes before departing Beirut, told the Charge that his most recent round of marathon meetings had resulted in "serious discussions" covering a lot of topics. If representatives from the majority and opposition could sit together and discuss these issues, they should be able to hold an election, he said. Moussa's Chief of Staff, meanwhile, reported that the talks resulted in agreement on five out of seven issues on the table, leaving only the most difficult issues, cabinet formation and cabinet decision-making process, unresolved. End summary.

[1](#)2. (C) Charge Sison, accompanied by Pol/Econ Chief, met briefly with Arab League Secretary General Amr Moussa on February 25, immediately prior to his departure from Lebanon. Hesham Youssef, Moussa's Chief of Cabinet, and Talal el-Amine, another aide, also were present and provided more details of Moussa's visit until Moussa himself arrived at the meeting.

MOUSSA SEES GLASS AS HALF FULL

[1](#)3. (C) Joining the tail-end of the meeting, Moussa summed up his visit as successful in that there were "serious discussions" covering a lot of topics. Agreeing that he saw the glass as half full, Moussa said that if the two sides were able to sit together and discuss these issues, they should be able to hold an election. In his press conference, Moussa stressed that the situation was extremely dangerous and serious, but nevertheless there was still hope, and the Arab League would continue its efforts. The next opportunity for Arab League representatives to meet was the March 5-6 Foreign Ministers meeting in Cairo.

5 OUT OF 7 ISSUES AGREED

¶4. (C) Speaking before the SYG's arrival, Youssef said Moussa had met twice during his visit with Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri, PM Fouad Siniora, and held two four hour meetings with the "Quartet" (Saad, Amine Gemayel, Michel Aoun, and Moussa). The meetings resulted in basic understandings/guarantees on five of the seven issues: 1) electing Michel Sleiman as president; 2) electoral reform; 3) respecting the decisions of the National Dialogue; 4) agreement on the Ministerial Declaration (outlining the government's program); and 5) the government would stay in power (i.e., not resign) until the 2009 legislative elections.

BUT TWO MOST DIFFICULT REMAIN

¶5. (C) However, Youssef said, the two most contentious issues remained: cabinet formation and cabinet decision-making. The two are interrelated, since agreement on how the cabinet will vote depends first of all on whether the opposition has a blocking third. With a blocking third, the opposition could block decisions requiring two-thirds approval, he explained; without it, the opposition would need a guarantee that decisions would be made by consensus.

¶6. (C) The basic problem, Youssef said, was the complete lack of confidence between the two sides. The opposition wants veto power because it doesn't trust the majority, while the majority fears the opposition will paralyze the government if it has a blocking third. Youssef said the two sides now had some breathing space to continue the dialogue amongst themselves, which he believed would help calm the tense situation.

NO DISCUSSION OF SPECIAL
TRIBUNAL OR SHEBAA FARMS

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7.(C) Youssef denied any discussions of the Special Tribunal or Shebaa Farms. The Tribunal was a "foegone conclusion" and should not be discussed as part of the Arab League initiative because that would give the impression that the Tribunal was a controversial issue. Unlike on other issues, where the Arab League remained impartial, it was "biased" on this issue, which was a critical part of solving Lebanon's crisis, Youssef said. The Arab League had no intention of doing anything that would negatively affect the Tribunal. Likewise, Sheba Farms was not an issue for the Arab League.

GARING UP FOR DAMASCUS

¶8. (C) Youssef predicted that there would be a lot of activity and visits among Arab League member states immediately prior to the March 27-29 Arab League Summit in Damascus. The Arab League itself would work on Syria in the next few days to ensure that it issued an invitation to Lebanon. After that, it was up to the GOL on whether to accept and at what level. The latter, he stressed, was not an Arab League issue.

DEVIL STILL IN THE DETAILS

¶9. (C) On how the parties intended to resolve the issue of whether Sleiman's election required a constitutional amendment, Youssef said they had agreed on language stating that constitutional issues "would not be an obstacle." On reform of the electoral law, Youssef said the parties had agreed that the 1960 law (which Aoun insists on) would be the "basis" for reform, and that all agreed on the "qada" (small district) system; however, he admitted that there was much disagreement on how to draw up the qada, especially in Beirut, where Saad had concerns.

COMMENT

¶10. (C) As we will report septel, the Arab League representatives' take on their most recent round of meetings was much rosier than that of the March 14 participants (Saad Hariri called the talks "useless"). And, as Youssef himself commented, the fundamental lack of confidence between the two sides remains. While the fact that agreement was reached -- if only in broad terms -- on some of the issues may be a small step towards confidence-building, there is still a large gap to bridge, and time is getting short if there is to be a solution before the Damascus summit. End comment.
SISON